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SUBJECT: CHINESE PRESS COVERAGE OF TIBET PROTESTS

REF: A. BEIJING 981

- 1B. CPP20080316968161
- 1C. CPP20080318338001
- 1D. FEA20080315583827
- 1E. CPP20080317530002
- 1F. CPP20080318584017/CPP20080318584016/200803185 84011
- 1G. CPP2008031854013

Classified By: Deputy Political Section Chief Ben Moeling. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary and Comment

1. (C) China's media strategy in covering the Tibet protests appears aimed at offering a coordinated "official" version of events for domestic and international audiences. On the evening of March 15, Assistant Foreign Minister Liu Jieyi provided a propaganda-heavy description of the protests to the Ambassador, characterizing the "beating, smashing, looting and burning" in Lhasa as a coordinated effort by the "Dalai clique" to weaken stability and to disrupt the Olympics. Since then, Government officials and media have repeated similar themes and have focused on the "victims" of the riots as well as the economic costs to Lhasa businesses. The official Tibet media has included sharper rhetoric than that issued by the central state media. For example, a March 17 editorial of the Tibet Daily, the TAR Party Committee's official paper, calls on authorities to "resolutely strike back" in "tit-for-tat fashion" and to "fight a people's war to oppose separatism and preserve stability." One media observer said that the authorities have issued guidelines on Tibet reporting and that media should "keep reporting to a minimum," "only report what is on Xinhua" and limit comments on articles. Comment: The Party leadership has orchestrated a carefully calibrated media response that appears designed to legitimize whatever action it takes to crack down on Tibetan protesters, contain the scope of unrest among Tibetan communities and deter other dissenting groups from creating disturbances before the Olympics. End Summary and Comment.

"Beating, Smashing, Looting and Burning"

1. (SBU) China's media strategy in covering the Tibet protests has evolved in the March 15-19 period and appears to be increasingly aimed at offering a coordinated "official" version of events for domestic and international audiences. The first Chinese-language report on the Tibet riot appeared late March 14, a few hours after China's official news agency Xinhua's English-language wire service began reporting on the disturbances. The Chinese-language Xinhua report stated that "since March 10, 2008, a very small minority of monks and nuns in the Lhasa region have been stirring up trouble and doing their utmost to create social chaos." The report went on to blame the "Dalai clique" for the violence. A broadcaster on CCTV-1, the official state television station, repeated the Xinhua report on March 15.

1. (C) On the evening of March 15, Assistant Foreign Minister Liu Jieyi provided a propaganda-heavy description of the protests to the Ambassador and characterized the "beating, smashing, looting and burning" as a coordinated effort by the "Dalai clique" to weaken stability and to disrupt the Olympics (Ref A). (Comment: "Beating, burning and looting" is a Cultural Revolution phrase used today to describe violent events that are spinning out of control and which the regime perceives to be fomented by regime enemies. This construction is very close to that. End Comment.)

1. (SBU) Since then, the Chinese Government's media message has repeated many of these themes and has emphasized the Dalai Lama's culpability for the violence. During a March 15 press conference by Qiangba Puncog, Chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Regional Government, reported by Xinhua and widely re-broadcast on Chinese state television, he reiterated the claim that the protests in Lhasa were "organized" and "pre-meditated" by the "Dalai clique." Xinhua also published an English-language article on March 17 entitled, "Dalai Clique's Secessionists Attempts Doomed to Fail" (Ref B). According to the article, the police reported that three monks "lacerated their bodies with knives and took pictures of one another" to be used in implicating others for their

injuries. The report claimed that "innocent civilians were stabbed, stoned and scourged." Lhasa police officers exercised "great restraint" in dealing with the lawless rioters, the report lauded. On March 18, during the regular MFA press briefing, the spokesperson repeatedly referred to the violence as "beating, smashing, looting and burning," saying that China has ample evidence to prove that the events were masterminded by the Dalai Lama. He also emphasized that the situation in Lhasa was normal and stable.

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15. (SBU) Beginning on March 15, CCTV 1, CCTV 4 and Lhasa Tibet Television 2 (in Mandarin) began to carry news clips, approximately one minute long, of the violence in Lhasa and emphasized the lawless actions of the rioters. Most of the coverage, including video clips of the violence, has appeared on CCTV-4, a channel aimed at overseas Chinese. CCTV-1, China's main channel, has carried brief summaries of Xinhua reports at the end of some of its nightly news reports, including a March 15 report with video clips. The coverage on local Tibet television has been much more extensive than central television, and on March 18, the entire 30-minute news program on Lhasa Tibet Television 2 was related to the protests (Ref D). (Comment: TV is the medium that reaches the most Chinese news consumers. End Comment.)

The Real "Victims"

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16. (C) The coverage by the Chinese press, which largely repeats or recycles Xinhua reports, has also focused on the "victims" of the riots. For example, a March 18 report in China Daily, the Party's official English-language paper, states, "It is ironic, and even ridiculous, to raise the issue of 'human rights' when the rioters have infringed upon the rights of the majority of Lhasa people...to work in peace and prosperity." The article also underscored that, "anyone who visits Tibet can see how life has improved for the people, the freedom they enjoy in religious affairs and how much their cultural heritage has been preserved." The Chinese reports have also highlighted the plight of Han, Tibetan and Hui business owners whose shops were looted.

Official Tibet Media Urges Strong Action

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17. (SBU) The official Tibet media have included sharper rhetoric than that issued by central media. A March 16 article posted on the website of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) quoted Tibet Party Secretary Zhang Qingli as he encouraged PAP "comrades in the midst of the struggle of fire and blood" to "stand firm in your positions and carry on the attack against enemy forces." He urged them to continue the "old Tibet spirit" of not fearing sacrifice or fatigue, and maintaining "special abilities to fight, suffer hardship and exercise patience." A March 17 editorial in the Tibet Daily (Xizang Ribao), the TAR CCP Committee's official paper, called on authorities to "resolutely strike back" in "tit-for-tat fashion against a "very small number of lawless elements who have engaged in beating, smashing, looting and burning" (Ref E). "We must...completely smash the arrogance of the hostile forces, win total victory in this struggle and ensure a stable social situation in the Tibet Autonomous Region." The editorial, which was read on Tibet TV, called for the mobilization of "cadres and masses to fight a people's war to oppose separatism and preserve stability." (Note: Editorials in provincial Party Committee dailies carry the imprimatur of the Provincial CCP Committee.)

Internet Censorship of Information

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18. (SBU) There have been reports of tightened Internet censorship in China since the rioting began on March 14. China's major chat rooms, including Sohu's "Let Me Say Two Sentences," Strong Country Forum (People's Daily's BBS) and Xinhua comment sections include commentary on the disturbances, but it is clear that they are heavily moderated. Opinions on these boards (which are not normally known for their unanimity of opinion) seem to all be in favor of suppressing the protests. Separately, a posting which first appeared on March 16 on the Harbin Real Estate Web network had a first-hand account of a netizen's experiences during the Tibet protests. Following the article, another netizen wrote, "Another disturbance in Tibet. I honestly don't understand why Tibet wants to be independent. The Government gives them such big subsidies every year!" Another commentator wrote, "Kill them all. It looks like the Tibetans still want to be serfs!!!" This posting was removed but cropped up on other PRC websites the next day. Reporters Without Borders reported that the BBC, CNN and Yahoo News websites have been "regularly inaccessible over the past few days."

19. (C) Jeremy Goldkorn (strictly protect), a longtime Chinese media observer and owner of danwei.org, told Emboff on March 19 that censorship of Western and Chinese internet websites has intensified since the eruption of violence in Lhasa. The major difference between Chinese reporting on the 1989 Tiananmen incident and the Tibet protests is that there appears to be more coverage of the violence in Lhasa. Goldkorn speculated that the Chinese state media has been

forced to report on the Tibet protests because of "leakage" to the Western media. He noted that, when the Tibet protests began, Chinese censors were already on high alert because of the National People's Congress. On March 14, Goldkorn found some "non-harmonized comments" which were sympathetic to the Tibetan people ("Pity the poor Tibetans") on Tianya.cn, but the postings were removed shortly thereafter. Since then, the online postings are largely unsympathetic to the Tibetan people. According to Goldkorn's friend who works for Sohu.com, the press guidelines from the authorities is to "keep reporting to a minimum," "only report what is on Xinhua" and limit comments on articles.

Media Blackout

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10. (SBU) Official media in Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan have not been observed to carry any reports on the violence in Lhasa or in the Tibetan areas of their own provinces (Ref F). Official media in Tibet have also been heavily censored and numerous media did not carry any reports on the Lhasa protests (Ref G). However, a search of the TAR official website (<http://www.xizang.gov.cn/index.do>) on March 19 shows numerous articles about the Tibet protests.

Foreign Journalists Protest

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11. (SBU) Reporters Without Borders (RSF) issued a statement on March 17 condemning the restrictions placed on journalists seeking to report on the Tibet protests. The organization complained that foreign journalists have been stopped from entering Tibet and Tibetan areas in neighboring provinces. RSF claims that 25 journalists, including 15 from Hong Kong, have been expelled from Tibet or Tibetan areas in China. The Chinese Government's actions are in "contravention of the rules for foreign media adopted in January 2007, ahead of the Olympic Games," RSF claimed.

Comment

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12. (C) Chinese language media were silent about the developments in Tibet until late March 14; well-informed Chinese contacts knew nothing at all about the week-long protests, which had erupted into violence March 14, until March 15. It seems clear that on March 15, the Chinese leadership agreed on an official position on the Tibet unrest, which was communicated by the MFA to the diplomatic community and the foreign press corps the same evening. The Party leadership has orchestrated a carefully calibrated media response to the unrest in Tibet that appears designed to legitimize whatever action it takes to crackdown on Tibetan protesters, contain the scope of unrest among Tibetan communities and deter other dissenting groups from creating disturbances before the Olympics. The media message may also be designed to portray China's response as consistent with international norms. The content of the message and the scope and selective pattern of response signals the leadership's concern over the potential for dissident groups to undermine social stability as the Olympics approaches as well as its sensitivity to international opinion.

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